

4. Land Use

4.1 Current Land Use

Figure 4.1.A depicts current (2002) land use within the unincorporated area. Among the patterns shown on the map are:

- The only concentration of commercial and industrial uses within unincorporated Polk County is found within Delaware and Saylor Townships, within the open area on either side of I-80.
- The great majority of land within the County is still in agricultural use; but large-lot and estate-type housing are prevalent in certain locations: along both sides of the Saylorville Reservoir, west of the Skunk River, and in the southeast portion of the County.

The character of the County's agricultural and residential areas was described and defined in the County's 1990 Comprehensive Plan, discussed below. One type of settlement that is not included in the 1990 plan's urban-to-rural continuum is the "historic village": places such as Berwick and Norwoodville (old coal mining villages) or Avon Lake (a vacation colony now largely surrounded by Carlisle). Each of these villages have their own distinctive character, with considerable variation among them. Common features include small residential lots and narrow streets. Housing conditions vary from excellent to poor. Parks, commercial uses and institutions such as churches or community centers are found in some villages; and all are characterized by the presence of rural water service and the absence of central sewers.

Figure 4.1.B shows building locations, providing another picture of concentrations of population within the cities and the County.

4.2 Current Land Use Plans

The greater Des Moines region is a mosaic of growing cities and unincorporated land within the counties. This pattern changes as cities expand outwards, annexing county land. The pattern at these 'edges' is the central issue that this comprehensive plan must address.

Polk County and each of the cities within it has its own history of growth and pattern of development, both existing and planned. This section focuses on how this pattern is expressed in the comprehensive plans of each jurisdiction.



Regional transportation and economic development plans and strategies are discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Polk County Comprehensive Plan

The 1990 Comprehensive Plan is a policy- and issue-driven document that has guided the County's zoning, natural resource protection, and growth management policies for over a decade. One unusual feature of the plan is its delineation of "community character" through a quantifiable method. The distinctions between "urban," "suburban" and "rural" character offer a useful point of departure for describing settlement patterns in Polk County.

Urban Type: Buildings enclose space, and the spaces foster intense human interaction. Crowding and congestion are essential components of urban life. The only example of this type in Polk County would be Des Moines' central business district.

Urban Transition Type: A transitional category with neither a high degree of urban enclosure or rural openness, characterized by "high activity areas served by automobiles and separated by bits of lawn" – i.e. the typical older commercial strip found in the more urbanized parts of the County, north of I-80 in Saylor and Delaware Townships.

Suburban Type: A balanced mix of garden-like open space and built structures, with a substantial degree of privacy on the individual lot. This type is found in many mature suburban residential neighborhoods. A common feature of this type is "borrowed open space" – temporarily borrowing the views or natural features of adjoining, as yet undeveloped, land.

Estate Type: The lowest intensity end of the suburban class, where individual properties are large enough to provide a feeling of openness and ample privacy. This type is exemplified by large lots on the western shore of the Saylorville Reservoir and along Beaver and Four Mile Creeks.

Countryside Type: A transitional character type in which open space is dominant but houses are scattered along rural roads, surrounded by agricultural land. This typical "urban fringe" character is found in areas such as Vandalia Road between Pleasant Hill and Runnels.

Rural Type: A landscape generally in intensive agricultural use, with scattered woodlands and other natural areas. Buildings tend to be farmsteads rather than isolated houses. Much of northern and eastern Polk County retains this rural character, as it did when the plan was written.



Industrial urban transition type



Suburban type



Rural farmstead

The plan presents a community character scale that quantifies different locations based on their percentage of urban, suburban and rural intensity. The roles and functions of these character types will be explored further during this Comprehensive Plan update.

Land Use and Zoning Districts

Community character is translated into land use districts, which have been applied through the County's zoning ordinance and map, as shown in Figure 4.2.A. The purpose and related zoning densities of each district is as follows:

Rural Districts: These three districts are intended to protect agriculture and rural character to differing degrees.

- **Agricultural:** to protect existing agricultural areas from scattered residential development through at least the year 2010. Maximum density is one dwelling unit per 35 acres.
- **Countryside:** to serve as a transitional district and provide for limited development opportunities in agricultural areas with lower-quality soils (density of one dwelling unit per 10 acres).
- **Estate:** to provide for estate-type housing on very large lots, and to permit equestrian types of development, while retaining a rural character (density of one dwelling unit per 3 acres).

Suburban Districts: Both districts are intended to provide for metropolitan growth to the north, east and south of Des Moines, with an upgraded suburban lifestyle meant to attract growth that would otherwise be lost to nearby counties.

- **Suburban Estate:** to provide a higher density form of estate-type housing on lots served by septic systems and provided with public water, with extensive open space protection requirements.
- **Suburban:** to provide for additional moderate-density development in parts of the county where existing development is already suburban in character, served by public water and sewer, with significant open space protection requirements.



Mobile home park

Neighborhood Conservation Districts: A variety of these districts are created to enable Polk County to continue to administer land use regulations in already developed areas and to allow infill development. These districts encompass the old villages and some later 20th century development in Saylor and Delaware Townships. Zoning lot sizes range from under 10,000 square feet to 40,000 square feet;

existing mobile home parks are also included. The NC districts were never mapped; the County maintains a list of subdivisions where the regulations apply.

Business Districts:

- **Neighborhood Business:** to provide limited convenience commercial uses at major rural intersections.
- **General Business:** to permit development that provides jobs in highly accessible corridors and highway interchange areas, notably on Polk County's eastern side where full municipal services will be provided. All commercial and industrial uses are permitted.
- **Light Business:** a less intensive set of uses along certain highway corridors, including institutional, commercial and some light industrial uses.

The remaining land use districts are:

- **Mobile Home:** to provide for new mobile home parks and subdivisions through a rezoning process.
- **Parks and Recreation Land:** to separate parks and other resource areas such as floodplain that are unsuitable for urban or suburban development (this district has no zoning equivalent).

Other recommendations of the 1990 plan include:

- Design guidelines to preserve and increase the amount of vegetation on street frontages and development sites, and to improve the appearance of signs, parking lots and lighting.
- Encouraging upscale single family housing in areas of hilly and rolling topography.
- Performance standards to assess and mitigate the impacts of different types of development on neighboring land uses and natural resources.

The comprehensive plan has, for the most part, effectively shaped the land use pattern in Polk County since its adoption. In particular, the plan has protected significant agricultural areas through imposition of stringent zoning controls. However, the appearance and functionality of many of the older commercial and industrial areas within the County have not significantly improved since the plan was adopted. Issues raised in the plan and its implementation will carry through the current planning effort.

Municipal Planning

Most of the larger cities within Polk County have recently updated their comprehensive plans, and these are summarized below, grouped by planning area. Figure 4.2.B is a composite of planned land use in municipal and county plans. In this map, compiled by the MPO, land use precedence over county plans, although city expansion areas are not shown in full. Reconciling the differences and addressing the conflicts between these plans is central to the County's planning effort.

North Central and Northeast Areas

Ankeny. Ankeny is a fast-growing community, by virtue of its large land area, strategic location on I-35 and adequate utilities and infrastructure. The city's recently adopted comprehensive plan (2004) promotes principles of smart growth while also laying out aggressive expansion plans. Smart growth elements of the plan include:

- Strengthening Ankeny's traditional City Center and civic campus as the focus of the community.
- Ensuring that growth occurs in the form of planned and defined neighborhoods containing a mixture of land uses, rather than disconnected, piecemeal housing tracts.
- Planning for mixed use at a variety of scale, from neighborhoods to urban corridors such as Ankeny Boulevard.
- Transportation policies requiring well-connected local streets and civic parkways connecting activity centers.

Taking Ankeny's rapid growth as a starting point, the plan envisions a continuation of the 4% yearly growth rate the city experienced in the past ten years, reaching a population of 55,000 in 2020. This growth would be accommodated through both infill and annexation. The plan establishes four development policy tiers:

- Tier I, the Urbanized Area, offering opportunities for infill and redevelopment, notably the Iowa State University Farm on the city's south side.
- Tier II, the Primary Urban Expansion Area, is intended to accommodate projected growth through 2020. It extends north to 118th Avenue and south along Four Mile Creek to I-80.
- Tier III, the Secondary Expansion Area, is intended to accommodate projected growth beyond 2020, but

portions may be developed sooner, if specific areas in Tier II are unavailable. It is located east and west of Tiers I and II.

- Tier IV, the Urban Reserve, extends north to the borders of Alleman and Elkhart, and south to I-80. It represents areas that are intended to remain in agricultural and open space use through the year 2020, with potential extension of urban services in the long term.

Bondurant. Bondurant, like Ankeny, is well-located relative to the highway system, just north of I-80 and adjacent to Highway 65. Growth potential is somewhat limited by the limited extent of the sewer system. The 2001 Comprehensive Plan is strategically oriented but general in its outlines. The future land use plan envisions a 20-year urban expansion area covering approximately three square miles, extending west of the existing city. Planned land use is primarily single-family residential, with an industrial park planned at the I-80 interchange.

Southeast Area

Altoona is one of the more rapidly growing cities in Polk County, benefiting from access to the new Highway 5/65 as well as I-80, and the presence of the Adventureland amusement park and the Prairie Meadows Race Track and Casino. The city is currently updating its comprehensive plan. The future land use map shows expansion in a southerly direction, extending to 36th Street SW, with an “urban reserve” extending to Highway 163. The plan concentrates business park and commercial uses close to Highway 65 and Hubbell Avenue. It envisions a series of new neighborhoods in the southern expansion area, connected by parkways and trails.

Pleasant Hill. Pleasant Hill borders Des Moines on the west and is the Highway 5/65 beltway on the east. The city’s comprehensive plan, last updated in 1995, includes policy statements but no map of future land use. It envisions development of all remaining developable land within the existing corporate limits during the 20-year planning period, plus some annexation of areas along the Highway 163 corridor and east of the corporate limits. (An effort at incorporation by the settlement of Rising Sun, just east of Pleasant Hill, was rejected following a legal challenge by Pleasant Hill in 1995, and some annexation has since occurred in this area.)

Carlisle. The developed portions of this city lie almost entirely within Warren County, while most of the land

within Polk County lies in the floodplain of the Des Moines River. The city does not appear to have a current comprehensive plan, but is encouraging business park development around the “gateway” Highway 5/65 interchange in Polk County, an area that the city recently annexed.

Northwest Area

Johnston. Johnston is both an employment center and a residential community, with headquarters of the Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed Company and related office/industrial development. The large Green Meadow planned unit development established a mix of housing, commercial development and parks in central Johnston beginning in the 1970s. The city is home to Camp Dodge, the large Army and National Guard training facility, which occupies 4,281 acres, or almost half the city’s land area. The broad floodplain of Beaver Creek also divides the city from north to south.

The Johnston Comprehensive Plan was updated in 1998 and amended several times since then, most recently in June 2004. The comprehensive plan concentrates most medium- to high-density residential, commercial and industrial uses south of Camp Dodge (NW 70th Avenue). The city’s proposed expansion area extends to the (proposed) boundary of Grimes and Highway 141 on the west and to NW 106th Avenue on the north. This area is planned for low-density residential development, emphasizing conservation or cluster design that preserves significant open space.

The plan was amended in 2004 to allow medium-density residential development in the Beaver Ridge area (Beaver Drive near Saylorville Reservoir) since central sewers are now planned for that area.

Grimes. Recent improvements to Highway 141 north and west of the city has prompted development of new business and industrial sites and begun to change the city’s character from that of a primarily residential community. The city’s comprehensive plan was updated in 2002. It shows expansion of the city’s boundaries to the east, encompassing both sides of the Highway 141 corridor; north to NW 85th Avenue, and west approximately one mile beyond the Polk County boundary.

One area of conflict with the Polk County plan and ordinance is in the area of Highway 141, zoned as “estate” by the County and planned for mixed use (commercial and high density residential) by the city. A mixed use

designation is also applied to the Highway 44 corridor through the existing town center. A larger mixed-use town center is planned at the intersection of James Street and NW 62nd Avenue.

The northern and western expansion areas are designated for mixed residential uses, leaving it to market and location factors to differentiate these into low, medium and high densities.

Polk City. While its location far from major highways has limited commercial development, Polk City has seen extensive new residential development that takes advantage of its natural and recreational amenities (Saylorville Reservoir, Big Creek State Park, the large Tournament Club golf course, etc.).

Polk City's 2002 comprehensive plan keeps most new development within existing city boundaries. A new civic parkway, Parker Boulevard, is planned as the centerpiece of a new neighborhood on the city's west side. The only expansion area shown on the plan is a new neighborhood with a mixed-use center north of the city's boundary at Sheldahl Drive and NW 126th Avenue.

Des Moines and Western Suburbs

Des Moines. Des Moines, a city with a long history of planning and civic improvements, has adopted a number of plans in the past decade that have some relevance for this planning effort, especially in the areas of economic development, downtown revitalization and affordable housing. The city's direction of expansion is to the south, into Warren County.

Because the city is largely developed, recent planning has primarily focused on infill and redevelopment. The *2020 Community Character Plan* (2000) analyzes and assesses the form of traditional neighborhoods and districts within the city, and includes a land use plan for developed and developing areas. The *Easter Lake New Town Plan* (2001) is a master plan for a traditional neighborhood development in the city's largely undeveloped southeast corner.

Urbandale. At the junction of two interstate highways, I-80 and I-35, Urbandale has benefited from substantial and diverse commercial, industrial and residential growth, and has grown gradually westward. The Urbandale Comprehensive Plan, last updated in 2003, is primarily a policy-oriented document that focuses on the potential for economic development within the city's existing boundaries. The plan states that residential development will not be allowed on parcels that have nonresidential development

potential, and retail uses should be secondary to office/business park uses.

Urbandale has an annexation agreement with Grimes that allows properties along Meredith Drive in the City of Grimes to voluntarily sever and annex into Urbandale, in order to facilitate sewer service to these areas. The city will continue to pursue these annexations.

A small 'island' of unincorporated Polk County land is located between Urbandale and Johnston at the I-80/Merle Hay Road interchange. The City may pursue annexation of this area when current annexation agreements expire.

Other policies include:

- Maintain or create village centers at several points along the city's central spine of Douglas Avenue: at 70th, 86th and 142nd streets.
- Continue to create residential neighborhoods, with potential expansion to the west (Dallas County).
- Promote opportunities for affordable single-family housing.

Windsor Heights. The city of Windsor Heights is a largely built-out community, is surrounded on all sides by incorporated cities, including Urbandale, Clive and West Des Moines.

Clive. The City of Clive, between West Des Moines and Urbandale, has expanded westward into Dallas County, and shares no boundaries with unincorporated Polk County. The City's plan, updated in 1998, looks at expansion of residential neighborhoods into Dallas County and some redevelopment of older commercial corridors.

West Des Moines is one of the major locations of growth in the Des Moines metro area, with a 2000 population of 46,403, and the Westown Parkway corridor, in particular, has captured much of the office development in the western suburbs. Its comprehensive plan, currently being updated includes the following elements:

- Development of the Jordan Creek Town center, a retail and residential complex 2 million square feet in size on 200 acres.
- A civic center at the city's geographic center, with city offices, several schools and a library.
- A housing ratio of 60 percent single-family (including attached housing) to 40 percent multi-family.

- Rehabilitation and redevelopment of the historic Valley Junction area, now evolving into a specialty retail district.
- Creation of new neighborhoods with a distinct identity derived from natural features and the presence of parks and open space, with sufficient concentrations of housing and employment that transit service becomes feasible.

Any future expansion of West Des Moines would extend west into Dallas County.

Outlying Rural Communities

The communities of Sheldahl, Alleman, Elkhart, Mitchellville, Runnels and are small towns, all except Mitchellville with populations of less than 1,000, and all surrounded by agricultural land. None have current comprehensive plans. (Elkhart and Alleman directly abut Ankeny's Tier IV.)

2030 Long-Range Transportation Plan

The Des Moines Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) recently completed its 2030 Long-Range Transportation Plan. Although the plan obviously focuses on regional transportation issues, it was developed based on a regional growth scenarios that has major implications for land use planning as well.

During the planning process, three regional growth scenarios were developed. The metro area was divided into three primary areas – Core (downtown Des Moines), Inner Ring and Outer Ring – and eleven Subareas, and specified levels of growth were assigned to each. The scenarios can be briefly summarized as follows:

- Alternative A: Steady growth (2% annually) on all sides of the Outer Ring and the downtown Core; stable growth (1% annually) in the Inner Ring.
- Alternative B: Continuation of previous trends, with steady growth in the west and north portions of the Outer Ring and downtown Core; slow growth (1.5% annually) of the east and south portions of the Outer Ring; stable growth in the Inner Ring.
- Alternative C: Steady growth in the north, east and south portions of the Outer Ring and downtown Core steady growth; slow growth in the west portion and stable growth in the Inner Ring.

Alternative C was selected by the MPO's Transportation Policy Committee. This choice is based in part on the expectation of policy changes and transportation

improvements (such as the Highway 5/65 improvements) that will encourage growth in eastern Polk County and northern Warren County.

4.3 Agriculture

This section focuses on agriculture as a significant economic activity as well as a major land use within Polk County.

Location within Polk County

The glaciers that shaped the Des Moines region left behind highly fertile soil north of the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers. The northern two-thirds of Polk County (except for the urbanized areas) is typified by agricultural areas. Agricultural activity on this highly fertile soil has benefited by widespread draining of wetlands. Ninety-nine percent of original wetlands have been drained in Iowa and drainage of farmland in Polk County follows this pattern. The relatively few areas with steep slopes and highly erodible soils are located primarily along the Des Moines, Raccoon and Skunk Rivers, and Saylorville Lake. Forested areas tend to be located in areas of steep slopes associated with river bottomland, as shown on Figure 1.6.B, Land Cover.

The total acreage of Polk County is 378,800; 236,792 acres (63 %) of which are in rural and agricultural areas outside of municipal boundaries. According to the USDA, in 2002 approximately 227,069 acres¹ were in farms in Polk County; this total includes farms within municipal boundaries. Steep slopes, areas with highly erodible soils and wetlands comprise 81,749 acres outside of municipal boundaries; most of these areas are not being farmed.

Iowa Code Section 352.6 allows the voluntary creation of “agricultural areas” of at least 300 acres in size. These statutory agricultural areas are created to protect the continuation of farming operations within the designated area. Land in these agricultural areas cannot be assessed for infrastructure improvements without the landowner’s cooperation. Several agricultural areas have been created



Corn and soybeans are the predominant cash grain crops in Polk County

¹ Table 8. Farms, Land in Farms, Value of Land and Buildings, and Land Use: 2002 and 1997, *2002 Census of Agriculture: Iowa State and County Data*, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series Part 15; United State Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service; June 2004

in Polk County in the area north of Ankeny extending to Alleman.

Farmsteads associated with farms in Polk County are evenly distributed along rural section line roads as shown on Figure 4.1.B, Building Locations .

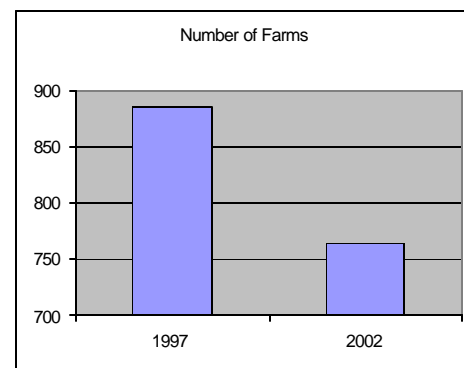
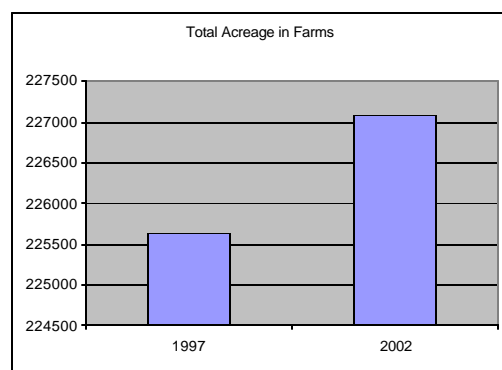
Description of Farms and Farmers within the Agricultural Area²

In 2002, there were 764 farms in Polk County with total combined acreage of 227,069. The number of farms declined nearly 14% from 1997 when there were 886 farms with a total combined acreage of 239,580 acres. The average size of a farm in Polk County in 1997 was 270 acres, increasing 10% to 297 acres in 2002.

Nearly 90%, or 204,203 acres, of the total land in farms in 2002 were dedicated to raising crops. Seven percent, 15,443 acres, were used for pasture, and 3%, 6,701 acres, were in woodland uses. Of the total cropland acres, eight farms had 224 acres under production with certified organically produced crops in 2002; and thirty-eight farms had 1,569 acres in nursery crops and 161,922 square feet under greenhouses.

Land enrolled in federal conservation or wetland reserve programs in 2002 totaled 7,613 acres, a decline of 3,663 acres from the 1997 total of 11,276 acres.

There were 764 principal farm operators in Polk County in 2002, down from 886 in 1997. (The principal farm operator is the person most responsible for farm operations.) Women comprised nearly 10% (75) of all principal farm operators. Only 427 (55%) of the total 764 farm operators reported farming as their primary occupation in 2002. This was an increase over only 391 who reported farming as their primary occupation in 1997. This slight shift away from dependency on outside farm income is also supported by decreases in days worked off the farm over the same time period. The average net cash farm income of a Polk County farm operator was \$34,971 in 2002. Nearly all farms in 2002 were owned by a family or individual (636, or 83%),



² Unless otherwise noted, the statistics in this section are taken from *2002 Census of Agriculture: Iowa State and County Data*, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series Part 15; United State Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service; June 2004

partnership (58, or 8%), or family-held corporation (57, or 7%).

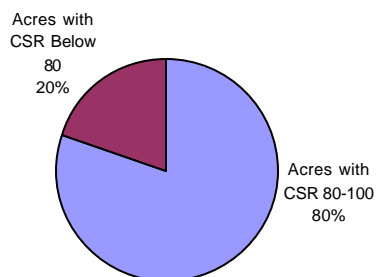
Mirroring state and national trends, the average age of principal farm operators in Polk County increased from 53.4 years old in 1997 to 56.5 years old in 2002. The average number of years the principal farm operator had been on the farm was 22.1 in 2002, an increase from 20.7 in 1997.

Production³

Polk County agricultural production consists primarily of corn, soybeans, hogs and pigs, and beef cows. The total market value of agricultural products sold in Polk County remains a significant economic activity, however, its value dropped from \$74,205,000 in 1997 to \$68,517,000 in 2002. Because of the decrease in the number of farms, however, the average market value per farm of products sold increased from \$83,752 in 1997 to \$89,682 in 2002. Values, as reported by the USDA, are not adjusted for inflation that may have occurred from 1997 to 2002. Over 86% of agricultural products sold were cash grain crops: 15,404,233 bushels of corn; 9,217,512 bushels of soybeans; 87,940 bushels of oats.) 49,805 hogs and pigs and 10,836 beef cows were sold from Polk County farms in 2002.

A measure of soil productivity is the Corn Suitability Rating (CSR) as illustrated in Figure 1.7.B, a numerical system for rating the productivity of farmland. CSR is calculated based upon the most recent Iowa Soils Properties and Interpretations Database.⁴ A CSR of 65 or higher is considered good agricultural land. A CSR rating of 80 and above indicates highly-productive land. Approximately 189,311 acres (80 % of total rural and agricultural land) of Polk County agricultural land have CSR ratings of 80 or above.

CSR Ratings on Rural and Agricultural Lands in Polk County



³ Unless otherwise noted, the statistics in this section are taken from *2002 Census of Agriculture: Iowa State and County Data*, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series Part 15; United State Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service; June 2004

⁴ The Iowa Soils Properties and Interpretations Database is developed by the Iowa State University in cooperation with United States Department of Agriculture (Natural Resources Conservation Services), and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (Division of Soil Conservation).

In 2001, there were two manure management plans on record for locations in Polk County, indicating two animal feeding operations regulated by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Confined animal feeding operations are regulated by the state, which requires separation distances ranging from 200 to 800 feet between manure disposal and wells and water sources.

Agricultural Land Values and Cash Rents

According to the USDA,⁵ farm real estate values, including land and buildings, have increased nationally every year since 1987, when values were at a low following the farm crisis of the 1980's. The average value per acre of farm real estate in Iowa rose steadily in actual dollars from \$1,760 in 1999 to \$2,010 in 2003, a 14% increase over four years. In 2002⁶, the average per farm estimated market value of farm real estate in Polk County was \$747,561, with a per acre average of \$2,156, 12% higher than the 2002 state average of \$1,920. Since valuation is based on agricultural use, this should indicate a rise based on agricultural market value, not potential for development.

Over the same period, the average value of cropland only in the state rose 11%, from \$1,900 per acre to \$2,120 per acre. Cash rent paid for cropland statewide had a more modest percentage gain, rising 8% from an average of \$112 per acre in 1999 to \$122 per acre in 2003.

Summary

The following summary points highlight characteristics of the agricultural area of Polk County:

- Farming occurs primarily throughout the northern two-thirds of the County.
- The USDA estimates over 62% of total land in Polk County is in farms.
- Agricultural soils in Polk County are extensive and highly-productive.

⁵ *Agricultural Land Values and Cash Rents: Final Estimates 1999-2003*; United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Statistical Bulletin Number 993; March 2004.

⁶ Table 1. County Summary Highlights: 2002, *2002 Census of Agriculture: Iowa State and County Data*, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series Part 15; United State Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service; June 2004

- The number of farms and farmers has declined in Polk County since 1997, while the number of acres in farms has increased slightly.
- The average size of farms continues to increase.
- The average age of farmers is increasing.
- Most farms are owned by families or individuals.
- Farmers saw a slight rise in income from 1997 to 2002.

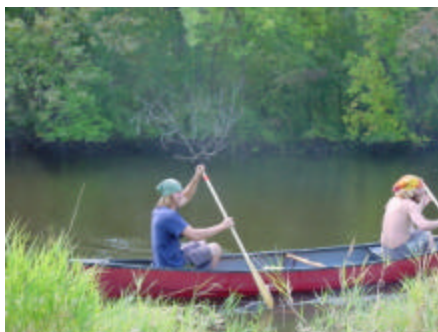
4.4 Parks, Trails and Open Space

Polk County contains a large and diverse array of parks, trails and nature preserves, as shown on Figure 4.4.A. This figure shows County-owned and managed facilities, state parks and wildlife management areas, and some of the largest municipal parks.

The Polk County Conservation Board manages the facilities listed in Table 4-1. County and regional trail facilities are also described in Section 5, Transportation.



Picnic area, Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt (top); canoeists on Skunk River (below)



Bike trail, Big Creek State Park

Table 4-1: Polk County Conservation Board Facilities

Facility/Location	Area Length	Facilities/ Activities	Description
Four-Mile Creek Greenway Trail Copper Creek Plaza in Pleasant Hill	4 miles existing Total of 35 miles planned	Nonmotorized paved trail; Hiking, cycling, in-line skating, cross-country skiing, etc.	When complete, the trail will extend approximately 35 miles through eastern and northern Polk County and will make up the lower portion of a 110-mile Central Iowa Trail Loop in five counties. Segment between Pleasant Hill and Altoona (4 miles) is open.
Beaver Creek Greenbelt NW 121 st Street so. of Hwy 141, north of Grimes	47 acres	No developed facilities. Hiking, birding and wildlife viewing.	Natural area along Beaver Creek; contains a Great Blue Heron rookery; site is closed during nesting season, March 1 – Aug. 1
Brown's Woods W. of SW 63 rd St., West Des Moines	484 acres,	2 miles of trails; hiking, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing.	Iowa's largest urban forest preserve features a canopy of oak and hickory trees on rolling hills bordering the Raccoon River.
Carney Marsh NE 70 th Ave., Ankeny (between Hwy 69 and I-35)	40 acres	No developed facilities. Hiking, birding and wildlife viewing.	Offers prime wildlife habitat in rapidly developing area; popular for birding. Plans include additional created wetlands, wildlife nesting and foraging area, and trail connecting to 4-Mile Creek and Neal Smith trails.
Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt	10 miles along Skunk River	Campground, canoe rental, picnic areas, rental lodge, hiking trails, trap shooting range, dog training area, waterfowl hunting blinds.	Originally acquired in 1960 to preserve and restore old oxbows of original Skunk River channel. Other natural features include river backwaters, marshes and wetlands, sandy upland hills with reconstructed prairie and native prairie remnants. 1910 Warren pony truss bridge spans old river channel. Preliminary master plan has been developed.
Chichaqua Valley Trail – Polk Co. trailhead on NE 88 th St., so. of Hwy 65	20 miles, Bondurant to Baxter (Jasper Co.)	Nonmotorized paved trail; cycling, hiking, in-line skating.	Rail-trail abandoned by Chicago & Northwestern Railroad in 1984; includes scenic crossing of Skunk River.
Easter Lake Park 2830 Easter Lake Drive, Des Moines	172 acre Easter Lake (total size of park?), 6 miles of trails	Swimming beach, boating, hiking, picnicking, playgrounds.	Opened in 1967 on site of Polk County's last operating coal mine. Includes Owens Covered Bridge, moved from original site on old North River Channel. Preliminary master plan has been developed.
Engeldinger Marsh NE 120 th St., 5 miles NE of Bondurant	81 acres	No developed facilities. Wildlife viewing, hunting.	"Glacial and ecological museum" with rare prairie pothole and sedge meadow; rich in wildlife and plant life.
Fort Des Moines Park 7200 SE 5 th Ave.,	112 acres, 12 acre lake	12-acre lake, boat launch, picnic shelters, playground,	Portion of former cavalry post of Fort Des Moines, established on Army Post Rd. in 1903, used for various military training

Facility/Location	Area Length	Facilities/ Activities	Description
Des Moines (so. of Army Post Rd.)		hiking trail, arboretum, baseball diamond	activities until 1960s; acquired by PCCB in 1972.
Four Mile Creek Greenbelt NE 38 th St. & NE 54 th Ave., Berwick	61 acres	No developed facilities. Hiking, fishing, hunting, birding, mushroom gathering	Undeveloped wildlife area
Great Western Trail Polk Co. trailhead on Valley Dr./G. Flagg Pkwy	18 miles, Des Moines to Martensdale (Warren Co.)	Nonmotorized, cycling, hiking, in-line skating	Rail-trail on rail line from Des Moines to St. Joseph, MO, operated by Chicago Great Western Co. 1892-1968. Opened as trail in 1992.
Jester Park 11407 NW Jester Park Dr., Granger	1,834 acres	Campsites (252), picnic shelters, golf (18-hole champion course, 9-hole par-3 course, golf learning and practice facility) Equestrian center Trails (8 miles; hiking, equestrian, snowmobiles), boat ramps, playground, bison and elk herds, nature programs	Extends from Hwy. 17 bridge to Mile-Long Bridge along western shore of Saylorville Lake.
Mally's Weh-Weh-Neh-Kee Park NE Berwick Drive	37 acres	Stream fishing, picnicking along Four Mile Creek	
Sycamore Trail Euclid Ave., Des Moines to NW 66 th St. in Johnston	6.5 miles	Nonmotorized; hiking, cycling, cross-country skiing, birding.	Trail runs through wild and scenic areas in the Des Moines River flood plain.
Thomas Mitchell Park	175 acres	Campground, picnic shelter, playground, fishing pond, hiking trails.	Named after Polk County's earliest Anglo-American settler, Thomas Mitchell; on site of his cabin, along Camp Creek. Park features a tall wooded ridge.
Yellow Banks Park	517 acres	60-unit campground, 3 picnic shelters, 5 acre pond, boat ramp on Des Moines River. Prime area for viewing migrating raptors.	On Des Moines River bluffs, hiking trails lead to overlooks of river valley, oak savanna, Native American burial mound and backpacking campground.



Boating area, Big Creek Lake

State Parks and Preserves

Several state parks, wildlife management areas and preserves are also found within Polk County. The major parks are:

- Big Creek State Park, located north of Polk City, is 3,550 acres in size and includes picnic areas and shelters, a swimming beach, multi-purpose sports field and several boat ramps; the lake provides excellent fishing. Big Creek Lake was created as part of the Saylorville flood control project.
- Walnut Woods State Park encompasses 260 acres of wooded bottomland along the Raccoon River, located at the southern edge of West Des Moines. Facilities include a campground, trails for hiking, skiing and equestrian use, and boating, canoeing and fishing on the river.

Federal Facilities: Saylorville Lake

The primary federal recreational facility in Polk County is Saylorville Lake, the flood control project created in the 1970s and managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Federal lands total 26,000 acres, including the 6,000 acre reservoir, the 16,700-acre flood-control pool, and surrounding lands. Facilities include four day-use areas, four campgrounds, two boat launch sites and several beaches.



4.5 Community Facilities

Figures 4.5.A and 4.5.B show the locations of local and regional community facilities and institutions within Polk County. Local facilities include schools, hospitals, public services such as police and emergency services, and cemeteries. The map indicates that the majority of these, with the exception of the many rural cemeteries within the County, are located within the cities. Regional facilities include the Living History Farm in Ankeny, Adventureland Park and the Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino in Altoona, as well as many performing arts and cultural facilities in the City of Des Moines.

